

FAMILIAR TOUCH

DISCUSSION GUIDE



www.familiartouchfilm.com

A film for those who are aging, those who are caring, and those who have been cared for: in other words, all of us.

Ruth (Kathleen Chalfant), a retired cook, prepares breakfast in her sunny and cozy kitchen — a dish she seems to have made many times before, although small and puzzling errors now punctuate her comfortable routine. When her son (H. Jon Benjamin) arrives to dine with her, she mistakes him for a suitor. Their “date” takes them to an assisted living facility, which Ruth does not remember that she had previously selected for herself. Among her fellow memory care residents, Ruth feels lost and adrift, certain she has found herself somewhere she does not belong. As she slowly begins to accept the warmth and support of care workers Vanessa (Carolyn Michelle) and Brian (Andy McQueen), she finds new ways to ground herself in her body, even as her mind embarks on a journey all its own. Writer-director Sarah Friedland’s coming-of-old-age feature compassionately follows the winding path of octogenarian Ruth’s shifting memories and desires while remaining rooted in her sage perspective.

INTRODUCTION:

To help you facilitate a discussion on *Familiar Touch* with your audience or students, we have outlined several areas below to guide the discussion. To support this, the discussion guide is organized into four sections: 1) Context on the making of *Familiar Touch*, 2) Guiding discussion questions, organized by introductory, thematic, and closing questions, 3) Additional discussion questions, if time allows, and 4) Key research findings on care in America today.

Intended key conversation takeaways:

- Life is beautiful and complex at every age. We all deserve to age with dignity.
- Quality care and services makes it possible to preserve agency and individuality.
- Creative storytelling has many opportunities, large and small, to change how we collectively perceive aging and care and deepen audience engagement.

CONTEXT: ON THE MAKING OF *FAMILIAR TOUCH*

Our society's marginalization and siloing of older adults is reflected in our film culture. While dozens of coming-of-age films come out yearly that show early adulthood, the small trickle looking to later life either make older adults the butt of the joke or tell a story about loss of identity or death through a dehumanizing lens. Rarely do we see stories attending to the complex and poetic humanity of older adults and the continuities of their senses of self, despite the challenges of aging and memory loss. When we do see older adults on screen, we almost never get to know the people who care for them. The need to reimagine our narratives around aging and care gets more pressing by the minute as we enter what Ai-jen Poo calls "The Elder Boom."

Integrating director Sarah Friedland's experiences as both a caregiver and teaching artist to older adults, *Familiar Touch* was made through an intergenerational production process between the residents and staff of a retirement community in California, and a mainly millennial crew. The filmmaking team facilitated a 5-week filmmaking workshop for the residents to make their own films before they joined the cast and crew of the scripted feature production, collaborating in reimagining the coming-of-age film.

OPENING QUESTION:

- What emotions did you experience while watching the film? Were there particular scenes that resonated with your own experiences with aging, caregiving, or receiving care and support?

Facilitator Tip:

*Depending on the time available, consider selecting **one question from each theme below to ensure a balanced conversation***

THEMATIC QUESTIONS:

1. Perspectives and Relationships

- Who are the key stakeholders represented in the film, and how do their different perspectives shape our understanding of Ruth's aging experience?
- What did the film reveal about relationships between older adults, their families, and care professionals? Why is it important for different stakeholders to understand each other's perspectives?
- How are intergenerational relationships portrayed, and what challenges or responsibilities emerge for family members—particularly those in the “sandwich generation,” those who are raising and caring for children and their aging loved ones simultaneously?

2. The Role of Care and Support

- What roles do care staff—such as CNAs, nurses, and physicians—play in supporting older adults, and what stood out to you about their contributions?
- Can you identify a moment in the film that reflected person-centered care? What did the caregiver do well, and what might have been done differently to further support the care recipient? Why is it important for both quality of care and dignity in aging?
- What did the film teach us about communication and understanding among residents, families, and care workers?

3. The Realities of Aging

- How does the film portray the realities and challenges of aging, including loneliness, cognitive changes, or moments of fear and uncertainty?
- How did you feel during key transition moments—such as the move-in scene—and what do they reveal about experiences of adjustment and vulnerability for older adults?
- In what ways does the film challenge common societal attitudes or stereotypes about aging?

4. Meaning, Joy, and the Whole Person

- Which moments in the film most powerfully illustrated joy, connection, or dignity in the aging process (such as the breakfast cooking or the birthday dance scenes)?
- How does the film encourage us to see the “whole person,” adding new layers and nuance to the assumptions we make about people based on their age, diagnosis, or care needs?

- The film suggests that everybody is touched by the aging process. What does that idea mean for individuals, families, and our broader communities?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- How might this film influence your studies, career interests, or involvement in aging and care services? Are there particular experiences, opportunities, or areas of learning you may now want to explore?
 - From an organizational or systems perspective, what could we do better to support aging individuals and their families? What lessons from the film stand out for improving care?
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SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS (if time allows)

- On Storytelling:
 - o How can film and television move beyond the ageist “decline narrative” in depictions of aging and memory?
 - o What might the coming-of-age genre offer for telling more nuanced and purposeful stories about aging adults and caregivers?
 - o What can intergenerational filmmaking look like, and how might it help challenge ageist media narratives?
 - o How do film portrayals of care work intersect with issues of race and gender?
 - o How can storytelling move beyond a capitalist view of aging—where value is tied to productivity and profit—and instead emphasize interdependence across generations?
 - o How do we challenge the sexist stereotypes of older women often seen in media? What role might portraying sexuality and intimacy in later life play in restoring dignity to these depictions?
- On Care and Community:
 - o The film shows care as shared among family and professional caregivers—a “care circle.” How can we shift our thinking from caregiving as an individual burden to a collective social responsibility?
 - o In Ruth and Vanessa’s relationship, care flows both ways. How can we better recognize the reciprocity of caregiving relationships, including the contributions of older adults and people with disabilities?
- On Class and Pay Equity:
 - o The film depicts a privileged care setting that many families cannot afford. What **policy changes or social investments** are needed to make high-quality aging care and service accessible to all?
 - o Vanessa’s story highlights the challenges faced by care workers. How can our narratives better recognize **caregiving as skilled work deserving fair pay, respect, and opportunities for advancement**?

CARE IN AMERICA TODAY: KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Aging Care

- The number of older adults (age 65 and older) is expected to nearly double from 57.8 million in 2022 to 88.8 million by 2060, underscoring how critical expansion of aging; disability care and of the direct care workforce is (ACL, 2024).
- The number of older adults who will need long-term care is expected to double from 15 million in 2020 to 30 million in 2080 (ASPE, 2024).
- 90% of older adults and 95% of disabled people prefer to receive care in their homes and communities (Data for Progress, 2021).
- The broad field of senior living and aging services is expected to need 660,000 new workers by 2033 to keep up with rising demand as the population ages in the US (NIC 2025).
- Based on Caring Across Generations polls, while 54% of adults express confidence in their understanding of Medicare coverage for long-term care services, only about 20% know that Medicare does not cover long-term care, and one-third of those with Medicare or private insurance incorrectly believe their plans do.
- More than 6 in 10 nursing facility residents rely on Medicaid, including those with Alzheimer's and dementia, and 62% of residents in certified nursing facilities use Medicaid as the primary payer for the facility services.

Family Caregivers

- There are 105.6 million Unpaid Caregivers in the United States, making up 40.5% of the US adult population (RAND, 2024). These caregivers are specifically those providing care to one or more adults over 18.
- 23% of U.S. adults are sandwich generation caregivers, with those in their 40s most likely to be sandwiched between their children and an aging parent. (Pew Research Center, 2022)
- Approximately 40% of family caregivers are men.
- Less than half of adults have had serious discussions about future care for loved ones, with only 43% discussing who will take care of them, and 39% addressing how the costs of such care will be covered. 43% express a lack of confidence in having the financial resources to pay for their needed care as they age (KFF 2023).
- Stigmas around aging, disability, illness and death and negative and disempowering stereotypes lead people to avoid thinking or planning around these issues until we are thrust into crisis and have to navigate it with little to no guidance or support.
 - o Films & TV can make a difference: [Caring Across Generations](#) study found that the “This is Us” caregiving storyline was associated with a more than two-fold increase in care-related conversations on Twitter.

Screen Representation

Older Adults

- Characters aged 50+ constitute less than a quarter of all personas in blockbuster movies and top-rated TV shows from the last decade. [GDI]

- Romantic storylines are disproportionately lower for characters 50+, with younger characters two to three times more likely to experience romance. [GDI]

Care

- Portrayals of care related to aging and disability implicitly reinforced ageist and ableist ideas that older adults and disabled people lack agency by rarely showing older and disabled characters having influence over their own care.
- Common care challenges — such as financial strain, balancing care with a job or personal life, and physical and mental health impacts on family caregivers are often missing. Many very common care-related activities — such as helping someone shower, dress, or eat; preparing food; cleaning the house; and managing medication or paying bills — were largely absent in care-related stories on TV.

This discussion guide was created in collaboration by the filmmakers and Vision Centre, Caring Across Generations, Front Porch Communities Foundation, and Music Box Films.



To book a screening, please contact Andrew Van Beek at Music Box Films
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